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DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
ALSO FOR IO/PDAS WARLICK
P FOR DRUSSELL AND RRANGASWAMY
USUN FOR WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER
NSC FOR MCDERMOTT, SHAPIRO

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: UNSCOL OPTIMISTIC ISRAEL WILL WITHDRAW
FROM GHAJAR BEFORE ELECTIONS

REF: BEIRUT 101

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon (UNSCOL) Michael Williams returned from consultations in Israel pleased with the thorough discussions he had, he told the Ambassador February 10. Williams was hopeful Israel would withdraw from Ghajar prior to the Lebanese parliamentary elections on June 17. In another positive step forward, Williams said Israel's Ministry of Defense had informed him that the "technical work" required to compile cluster bomb strike data from the July 2006 war was complete. However, he was advised that the release of the data to Lebanon required a political decision.

¶2. (S/NF) Williams assessed that indirect talks would continue between Israel and Syria, although a new intermediary likely would be used instead of Turkey. He also noted a slight change in Israeli thinking to attempt to include Lebanon in broader talks to secure the whole of its northern border. On the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, UNSCOL staff confirmed that the Tribunal would begin March 1, as scheduled. However, if defendants were transferred to The Hague before judicial procedure was agreed, the defendants would exist in a sort of "legal vacuum."

¶3. (C) Also briefing on his recent trip to Europe, Williams said European support for Israeli withdrawal from Ghajar was still high, although on Sheba'a Farms his interlocutors were more distant. He was concerned about continued European support for the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) beginning in 2010 due to other competing demands. End summary.

OPTIMISTIC ISRAEL
WILL WITHDRAW FROM GHAJAR

¶4. (C) UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon (UNSCOL) Michael Williams, UNSCOL Chief of Staff Jack Christofides, and UNSCOL Poloff Rami Shehadeh told Ambassador and Poloff February 10 that Israel was taking the issue of Ghajar more seriously than they had expected, given the February 10 Israeli

elections. UNSCOL completed his most recent consultations in Israel February 8-9 and said he was pleased with the thoroughness of the discussion.

15. (C) During his February 8 meeting with Israeli Director General of Foreign Affairs Aaron Abramovitz and his team of legal and military advisors, Williams and UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) Commander General Claudio Graziano learned that Israel planned to take two steps on Ghajar. First, Israel had scheduled a team of technical experts to visit Ghajar on February 11 to make assessments of services provided to residents, including emergency services, electricity, telecommunications, and education services. Second, Israel planned to have the technical team meet with a UNIFIL technical team one week later to discuss its assessments. Williams was optimistic that Israel would withdraw from Ghajar, hopefully before Lebanese parliamentary elections on June 7, even if UNSCOL needed to increase pressure on Israel to do so, he said. Williams said he told his Israeli interlocutors that withdrawing from Ghajar was a "confidence-building measure" that would support Lebanese moderates.

16. (C) Williams also confirmed that the Tripartite meetings between Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and UNIFIL were being conducted regularly, with all three parties at the table. He hesitated to call the meetings "direct negotiations," fearing that was too strong a characterization. If Israel does withdraw from Ghajar, the IDF and the LAF would still require the assistance of UNIFIL, he said. Israel, he claimed, hoped for a more expansive

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dialogue with Lebanon. However, Williams believed that this would be "extraordinarily difficult" after the December/January Gaza crisis.

ISRAELI MOD SAYS
STRIKE DATA READY FOR RELEASE

17. (C) On February 9, Williams (without Gen. Graziano) held meetings with representatives of Israeli Prime Minister Olmert, Abramovitz's staff, Ministry of Defense (MOD) Generals Baidatz (Chief of Military Intelligence), General Heymann (Head of Operations) and General Amos Gilad in preparation for the next UNSCR 1701 report that will cover mid-November to mid-February, he said. Williams said General Heymann informed him that the Israeli MOD had completed its "technical work" to compile cluster munitions strike data, but an Israeli political decision was required before it could be released. This information was new and would be noted in the forthcoming report, Williams said. Also in the report, he planned to note the increase in Israeli overflights of Lebanon, which averaged 20 or more per day since the start of the Gaza crisis.

18. (C) Williams and his UNSCOL colleagues assessed that Israel handled carefully the release of crew and passengers aboard the MV Tali, the "Brotherhood" ship that attempted to break the Israeli blockade and deliver humanitarian goods to Gaza February 5. However, they worried that the Israeli government would not be as "lenient" in the future should similar incidents occur, based on the statements of their Israeli interlocutors. Williams feared continued such incidents could spark provocation in Lebanon. He also noted Israel's message to the GOL that Israel would take retaliatory measures in Lebanon if Hizballah took any action, anywhere in the world to commemorate the death of Imad Mughniyeh.

ISRAEL-SYRIA TALKS
LIKELY TO CONTINUE

19. (C) Williams believed that even if Benjamin Netanyahu won

the Israeli elections, Israel would be compelled to return to indirect talks with Syria "out of necessity," if it hoped to attempt to address its issues with Iran. However, Williams said Israeli PM representative Terjemon was fairly definitive that the talks would not be carried out with Turkey as the intermediary. Israel, he reported, was "as annoyed with the Turks, as the Turks are with the Israelis." General Gilad told Williams that Israel also preferred Lebanon take part in the talks as part of Israel's strategy to secure the whole of its northern border. Williams noted that this view presented a slight change in Israel's approach.

UNSCOL ON SPECIAL TRIBUNAL

¶10. (S/NF) The first order of business for the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) after March 1 is for the judges to establish rules of procedure, Christofides reported. (Note: On January 23, Lebanese Justice Minister Ibrahim Najjar told Ambassador that the judges would address the procedural issues in The Hague March 9-20 -- reftel. End note.) However, if the four generals or other defendants were transferred to The Hague during this period before procedures are set, a "legal vacuum" exists for how to handle the transfer, Christofides continued.

¶11. (C) Williams reported that STL Registrar Robin Vincent was currently in Beirut to iron out logistical issues and to search for office space for the Beirut STL office that would remain once the STL was launched in The Hague on March 1. There would not be any ceremony in Beirut to mark the start of the Tribunal, Williams confirmed. (Note: The March 14 coalition has begun its campaign to urge support for the Tribunal. Posters and billboards have started to appear on the streets of Beirut and its surrounding suburbs. End note.)

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EUROPEAN SUPPORT FOR UNIFIL

¶12. (C) In late January, Williams also visited European capitals to lobby for continued support for UNIFIL, he said. He said he had had productive meetings with Italian FM Franco Frattini, Spanish FM Miguel Moratinos, and spoke by phone with Jean-David Levitte, advisor to French President Sarkozy. All three countries, he said, remained supportive of resolving Ghajar, but were more distant about Sheba'a Farms. Moratinos suggested that a delegation, including Spain, France and Italy, might visit Lebanon and Syria in the coming months. However, Williams remained concerned about competing for European personnel support for UNIFIL beginning in 2010 in the midst of other demands, especially budgetary and other defense needs, such as increased troop deployments to Afghanistan.

COMMENT

¶13. (C) UNSCOL's assessment of Israeli commitment to withdraw from Ghajar was more positive than we expected given the timing of his visit. Our Lebanese interlocutors likely will remain skeptical of Israeli intention until more concrete actions are taken -- not just the assessments conducted by technical teams. However, if Israel indeed decides to release the newly compiled strike data to Lebanon, as described to Williams, we assess this could build greater confidence. End comment.

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